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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: MVR DEPUTY ON PLAN COLOMBIA: REDUCING FARC  
PRESENCE ON BORDER

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d  
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Summary  
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[11.](#) (C) Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) Deputy Saul Ortega, President of the National Assembly International Relations Commission, said increased counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism cooperation would be an excellent basis for improved US-Venezuela relations, in a meeting with poloff March 2. He also pointed to increasing trade between the two countries as a sign that our political relations should improve. Ortega asserted that the two governments were bound to disagree, however, on Cuba and Colombia. Ortega volunteered the observation that Plan Colombia was reducing the presence of the FARC on the Venezuela-Colombia boarder, and criticized FARC violence against Venezuelans, while refusing to call them "terrorists." End Summary.

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US-Venezuela Relations  
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[12.](#) (C) Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) Deputy Saul Ortega, President of the National Assembly International Relations Commission, talked to poloff about Venezuela-U.S. relations March 2. Ortega posited that there is no anti-Americanism in the Bolivarian Revolution, rather a political conflict with the government. He said nobody who wanted to construct a true democracy could ignore American history, and pointed out that President Hugo Chavez had recently started quoting Thomas Jefferson. Asked about government to government communications, Ortega said that there were some areas where we shared interests and worked together, and others where we would inevitably disagree.

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Cooperation  
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[13.](#) (C) Ortega noted that counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism were two areas where we shared interests. He complained that we gave Venezuela no credit for its efforts to stop drug smuggling, although, according to him it is one of the most active countries in Latin America. He said Venezuela had never had so many arrests or seizures as now, noting that further cooperation in this area would be an excellent area for improved relations. Discussing counter-terrorism, Ortega said that the GOV had no interest in having "those people" here, and that given information that terrorists were operating in Venezuela, the Venezuelan authorities would act. He objected, however, to broad statements about terrorists in Margarita, for example, without specific proof. He said Venezuela had a large Arab population, and while he did not doubt there might be some terrorists, most were legitimate businessmen and should not be stigmatized as a group.

[14.](#) (C) Ortega also highlighted growing economic ties between the U.S. and Venezuela, noting that commerce between the two countries had grown from 17 billion bolivares last year to 24 billion this year. He stressed that this was not just Venezuelan oil exports to the U.S., but also imports of goods from the U.S. to Venezuela. He argued that this healthy economic relationship should serve to create better political relations.

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Cuba and Colombia  
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[15.](#) (C) Ortega gave Cuba and Colombia as two examples of areas where the GOV and USG would inevitably disagree. Ortega said the GOV would maintain close ties to Cuba. He said Cuba had excellent health care and education professionals, and that Venezuela needed their help to improve living conditions for poor people. Communism was not destined to grow in Latin America, Ortega said, and he wondered personally why the Cuban government did not allow elections, given the support he believed it enjoyed.

16. (C) Discussing Colombia, Ortega said the key fact in Colombia is that the FARC controls half the country and cannot be defeated without some kind of negotiation. He claimed the Uribe government ruled only in the cities due to military occupation. Ortega gave his interpretation of Colombian history, under which the Colombian "oligarchy" has always prevented a political solution by assassinating Colombian left wing political leaders. Ortega said he hoped nothing of the kind would happen to the leaders of the "Polo Democratico" in Colombia today. Ortega also said he did not understand USG insistence on blaming the Colombian situation on President Hugo Chavez. He insisted that the conflict long pre-dates Chavez, and that Colombians were responsible for solving their own problems. Poloff pointed out that President Alvaro Uribe enjoyed high levels of support in Colombia, and that U.S. aid was intended to extend the effective control of the state over the whole country, and not to favor of any specific government.

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Plan Colombia  
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17. (C) Ortega objected to defining the FARC as terrorists, asserting that no one had called the FARC terrorists when Raul Reyes had an office in the Venezuelan MFA, under the governments of Carlos Andres Perez and Rafael Caldera. At that time, according to Ortega, the FARC killed Venezuelan soldiers, kidnapped ranchers, and extorted businessmen. Ortega said it was the Colombian government's fault for not controlling its borders. As for Plan Colombia, he called it an example of U.S. misunderstanding of Latin American reality. However, Ortega said that one good side-effect had been a reduction of the FARC presence on the Venezuelan border, as the guerrillas retreated to their bases. Poloff suggested that there was a shared interest between the USG and the GOV to help Colombia establish control over its territory, and that the USG would welcome active GOV collaboration.

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Nationalization  
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18. (C) Ortega asserted that the GOV believed there were over two million Colombians in Venezuela, and the GOV did not know who they were. He said the GOV naturalization drive, which he said had given 400,000 of these people ID cards, would help identify guerrillas and other criminals in Venezuela. He said the recent agreement between Chavez and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to share information through the two Defense Ministries should help avoid a repetition of the dispute over the capture of the FARC leader Rodrigo Granda, and increase cooperation. He said it now seemed likely that one of the Colombians arrested recently in Bolivar State for kidnapping the mother of a major league baseball player was a member of the FARC, and that if his identity was confirmed, the GOV would extradite him to Colombia. Poloff commented that this would be an excellent step to show Venezuelan resolve to cooperate with Colombia in combating the FARC.

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Comment  
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19. (C) Ortega nicely summarized the position of Chavista "moderates" on relations with the U.S.: Good economic relations plus cooperation in the wars on drugs and terrorism should add up to U.S. neutrality vis-a-vis Venezuela. Ortega's admission that Plan Colombia was helping the Venezuelans on the border challenges the usual rhetoric that combat operations are pushing guerrillas into Venezuela. Taken at his word, U.S.-Venezuela interests in Colombia do not appear that far apart. Unfortunately, Ortega is unlikely to greatly influence Chavez or other GOV officials who find value in maintaining an anti-U.S. hard line.  
Brownfield